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Teaching human rights online: An open access approach

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Introduction

Since 1948, the human rights of every individual have been internationally recognized through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To a large extent, however, human rights are only meaningful when individuals are aware of those rights and the mechanisms available to support them. In many countries, both Western and non-Western, education about human rights is limited or non-existent. Moreover, access to such education at an advanced level is typically limited by numerous barriers, such as the ability to meet the prerequisites to enroll in a university subject about human rights, or to pay the often substantial cost of enrolment. In 2015-16, at the University of Wollongong, I took part in an initiative designed to overcome these barriers, through creating an online, open access university subject about human rights. The subject, forming part of a new online Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship,

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could be completed for free by students, and required only internet access. This article reflects on the process of developing and facilitating this subject. “Introduction to Human Rights” was unique as one of the first efforts to make this level of education about human rights freely available online, and in its commitment to being fully open access (course.oeru.org/introduction-to-human-rights/). Unlike many online subjects, which are essentially a video or audio recording of an on-campus university subject, Introduction to Human Rights utilized an expanded methodological approach to creating and incorporating educational content. Some major challenges, including a number of unanticipated ones, impacted on the process of creating and running the subject. Despite its success, and positive feedback from students, the University did not support its continuation. Arguably, this outcome reflects some of the inherent tensions between the MOOC and open education approaches, and those of the university-based higher education model. It also highlights both the opportunities and barriers associated with adopting a transformative human rights education methodology in an online educational space.

Human Rights Education: Theory and Practice

The right to human rights education is clearly recognized in international law (UN 2014). Most recently this has been expressed in the United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET), adopted in 2011. Article 1 declares: “Everyone has the right to know, seek and receive information about all human rights and fundamental freedoms and should have access to human rights education and training” (UNDHRET, 2011). As Kirchsclaeger has noted, this right is crucial because without it, “Human rights declarations and treaties run the risk of remaining wonderful pieces of paper without any impact on the reality of the lives of humans who are actually human rights holders and duty-bearers” (Kirchsclaeger, as cited in Bajaj, 2017, p. 91). This is explicitly recognized within the UNDHRET, which offers a three-

dimensional framework for human rights education. According to the declaration (UNDHRET 2011, Article 2):

Human rights education and training encompasses education:

- (a) About human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
- (b) Through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;
- (c) For human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.

Human rights education, as currently conceived by the UN, is therefore arguably intrinsically a form of transformative education. It promotes learning that is emancipatory, and empowers individuals to respect and promote human rights (Tibbitts, 2017; Bajaj, 2011; Bajaj, Cislighi & Mackie, 2016; Keet, 2010; Bezbozhna & Olsson, 2017).

The field of human rights education is a recently established and growing field globally. The UN General Assembly proclaimed the decade commencing in 1995 as the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, contributing to a growing focus on the theory and practice of human rights education. Despite many advances in the field, as recently as 2013 Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert highlighted that it is still challenged by issues of legitimacy, and “the lack of a theoretical framework” (Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2013, p. 389). Nonetheless, several models have been proposed to categorize human rights education practice and methodological approaches. These include the “Values and Awareness”, “Accountability” and “Transformation” models outlined by Tibbitts (2002, 2017) in her pioneering work; Gregg’s (Bezbozhna & Olsson, 2017) theory of a “human rights cognitive style”, and the hermeneutical interpretive methodology

proposed by Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert (2013). The research presented herein adopted an approach consistent with that of transformative human rights education. As Bajaj, Cislighi and Mackie have identified, the goal of transformative human rights education involves “activating individual agency and collective transformation at a societal level” (Bajaj, Cislighi, & Mackie 2016, p. 15). Conceived in this way, human rights education not only encompasses learning within formal education structures, but “has deep roots in the nonformal education sector” (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 61). Transformative human rights education offers a community-based approach, suitable for formal or non-formal settings (Bajaj, Cislighi, & Mackie, 2016). According to Bajaj, Cislighi and Mackie, it “contains cognitive, affective, and action-oriented elements”, and seeks “to foster in learners an awareness of global citizenship and a respect for human rights” (Bajaj, Cislighi, & Mackie, 2016, p. 3).

Despite its relatively recent emergence, transformative human rights education has demonstrated a strong ability to influence the practice of human rights. Bajaj, Cislighi and Mackie (2016), for example, have outlined four cases in which formal and non-formal transformative human rights education has had a real impact on recipient communities. Cislighi, Gillespie and Mackie (2016) have further explored the potential of transformative human rights education in rural Senegal. To date, however, there has been little research into how transformative human rights education might be conducted in an online environment. Yet it is recognized that in countries with low and medium human development levels, e-education offered through MOOCs might be a powerful tool to offer human rights education to citizens (Sanchez-Gordon & Luján-Mora, 2016). MOOCs “can broad[en] the access to tertiary education and help reduce costs by offering university level studies from recognized educational institutions free of charge”, for students in low- to middle-income countries that could otherwise not afford it (Sanchez-Gordon & Luján-Mora, 2016, p. 156). This article seeks to address this gap in the scholarship, through examining a case study of transformative human rights education in the online environment.

Background to the Project

Introduction to Human Rights, and the Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship of which it was part, were developed within the context of a broader University of Wollongong (UOW) initiative to increase its online presence. Like many universities at present, UOW is seeking to expand its online course offerings. The *UOW Core Strategy 2016-2020: Education* identifies as an education priority to: “grow our education footprint through our open learning ... strategies” (UOW, 2016, p. 2). This includes a specific commitment to the “development and deployment of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)” (UOW, 2016, p. 7). According to Vice-Chancellor Paul Wellings, this commitment is “about connecting to our communities”, and offers “a transformational moment for the university” (Wellings, 2013). The Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship was developed in conjunction with online provider Open Education Resource universitas (OERu). Funding for the project was provided through a university grant. This was obtained by Professor Graham Williams, then Associate Dean of Education and Dr. Susan Engel, Senior Lecturer in International Studies, through a competitive grant application process.

The Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship was designed as a semester-length course, at the honors/masters level. It provided a new educational pathway for students who had completed an undergraduate degree, but perhaps did not want to commit to a longer Masters program. Graduate certificates are becoming increasingly popular amongst Australian universities, and often focus on a relatively narrow specialization. Other examples include the Graduate Certificate in Human Rights from Curtin University and the Graduate Certificate in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Queensland (courses.curtin.edu.au/course_overview/postgraduate/GCert-HumanRights; https://my.uq.edu.au/programs-courses/program_list.html?acad_prog=5648). Many are offered fully online. The Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship comprised three core subjects, and one elective. The three core subjects were ‘The United

Nations, Global Governance and Diplomacy” (course.oeru.org/unglobalgovdiplomacy/), “Global Issues: Concepts and Challenges” (course.oeru.org/global-issues/) and “Research Methods for Social Sciences” (course.oeru.org/research-methods/). Originally it was envisaged that students would select their elective from within the subject offerings of other OERu partners. As the project progressed, however, it became apparent that few such offerings would be ready for commencement by early 2016, when the Graduate Certificate was scheduled to launch. It was therefore decided to develop one elective within UOW. Introduction to Human Rights was the result. My role in this project was as developer and subject coordinator of three of the four subjects: The UN, Global Governance and Diplomacy, Global Issues: Concepts and Challenges, and Introduction to Human Rights.

Adopting an innovative approach

Introduction to Human Rights, and the Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship, challenged traditional boundaries in tertiary and online education in a number of ways. A major departure from traditional tertiary practice was the innovative business model through which the Graduate Certificate was offered. Most Graduate Certificates are only accessible to students after paying very substantial course fees to enroll, and course materials are only available to enrolled students. The Graduate Certificate in Peace and Conflict Studies offered by the University of Queensland, for example, costs approximately A\$10,000. By contrast, students undertaking the Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship were able to access all course material online without formally enrolling, and to complete the subjects (without assessment) for free. Students wishing to have their coursework assessed, and to receive a certificate of completion, could do so by paying a modest fee of A\$400 per subject.¹ The total cost of the Graduate Certificate

¹ Price for 2016 enrollment.

was therefore only A\$1600. The purpose of this alternative business model was to ‘offer students a cost-effective, online pathway to formal study at UOW’ (UOW, 2015, p. 17). That is, this model was designed to attract students who might otherwise not be drawn to UOW, and particularly to attract students to the (on campus) Master of International Studies degree. Students completing subjects from the Graduate Certificate were able to apply for these subjects to be credited towards a subsequent Masters degree. This innovative business model has subsequently been adopted elsewhere within the field of human rights. Curtin University, for example, offers a three-subject ‘MicroMasters Credential’ in human rights through online provider EdX, which at a similar price then offers eligibility for, and some credit towards, the Curtin Masters of Human Rights (www.edx.org/micromasters/curtinx-human-rights).² This business model recognizes the increasingly competitive space in which universities in Australia operate postgraduate programs.

The Introduction to Human Rights subject was also innovative in that, at the time of its development, there were no comparable, free online subjects in human rights available (to my knowledge). Designed to be equivalent in content and standard to an on-campus, semester length subject at the honors/masters level, Introduction to Human Rights contains a much greater depth of material than typical of many online offerings. Additionally, at the time of its creation neither Coursera nor EdX, the two most well-known and prolific MOOC providers, offered comparable online subjects in human rights (with the partial exception of EdX’s subject International Human Rights Law, discussed below). While this is a fast-moving space, at the time of writing online subject offerings in human rights remain limited. Coursera offers a beginner level, 12-18 hour subject on human rights focused on the European Convention on Human Rights (www.coursera.org/learn/humanrights). EdX has a wider range of offerings,

² Curtin University’s Graduate Certificate in Human Rights, however, offered both as an on-campus and as a fully online course, costs approximately A\$8900 for domestic students, or A\$14,500 for international students (studying on-campus).

including introductory subjects on the rights of refugees and the right to freedom of expression, each designed to be completed in 9-15 hours (www.edx.org/course/human-rights-rights-refugees-amnesty-internationalx-rights2x; www.edx.org/course/human-rights-right-freedom-expression-amnesty-internationalx-rights1x). There are more in-depth subjects on the EU and human rights, and international human rights law (www.edx.org/course/eu-human-rights-kuleuvenx-euhurix-o; www.edx.org/course/international-human-rights-law-louvainx-louv2x). Thus like most MOOCs, these courses are quite specialist, leaving a gap in generalist open access education resources.

More comparable are three new subjects from Curtin University, that commenced in 2017. 'Human Rights Theory and Philosophy', 'Human Rights and Development' and 'Human Rights Activism, Advocacy and Change' are each described as advanced level subjects, requiring 8-10 hours per week over 12 weeks (www.edx.org/course/human-rights-theory-philosophy-curtinx-hrig1x; www.edx.org/course/human-rights-development-curtinx-hrig2x; www.edx.org/course/human-rights-activism-advocacy-change-curtinx-hrig3x). Students that complete all three are eligible for an EdX 'MicroMasters Credential', as mentioned above (www.edx.org/micromasters/curtinx-human-rights). In some respects, however, Introduction to Human Rights remains unique as a stand-alone overview of human rights.

A third notable element of the subject was its commitment to open access materials and open education resources. Open access materials are research outputs that have no restrictions on access. Open education resources are freely accessible, and in addition are made available under licensing arrangements (such as Creative Commons licenses) that permit free use for educational purposes, and sometimes repurposing or modification. All subjects that formed part of the Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship were assembled using open education resources and open access materials. This had important implications. For students, it meant easy and free access to all course materials. There was no requirement to purchase textbooks or readings, eliminating what can sometimes be a substantial financial barrier. This also meant that in

creating and assembling subjects for the course, only freely accessible material could be included. Material subject to copyright restrictions preventing free access, such as most textbooks, could not be used. In the following section, I discuss how this limitation impacted on creating and assembling the content for Introduction to Human Rights.

Creating the subject

This research adopted an exploratory, single case study research design. In many respects this case study research is atypical, in that the methodology itself – of creating the online subject – could only be defined as the process progressed. Creating and running Introduction to Human Rights was an exploratory process, with each component requiring an innovative and flexible approach. The below sections present the methods utilized for this research as they evolved, followed by the results with respect to the subject that was created, and the experience of running it. Due to the exploratory nature of the methodology, the below sections are presented as a chronological developmental process, which best captures the essence of the project.

Introduction to Human Rights was designed to be similar in structure and content to an on-campus university subject.³ It also adopted a transformative human rights education approach. The subject comprises an introductory module, twelve topic-based modules, and three assessment tasks. The introductory module contains information on setting up a personal learning environment, a subject guide, a refresher on essay skills and information on general resources for the subject. Each of the topic-based modules is broadly equivalent to one week of a university course. Content typically includes a lecture of an hour or so, readings such as journal articles, and often primary source material. In accordance with the

³ All components of the subject can be accessed at: course.oeru.org/introduction-to-human-rights/.

transformative human rights education approach, where possible each topic includes cognitive components, such as information about specific areas of human rights; affective components, that seek to foster respect for human rights; and a critical component that encourages students to link their learning with the community in which they reside, and consider the possibility for action-oriented strategies (Bajaj, Cislighi, & Mackie, 2016). Each module also offers one or more optional extension activities. These may be an additional lecture or reading, or a web-based resource to explore. Students are encouraged to engage with course material critically, akin to the way in which might be expected in a tutorial. For example, students instructed to read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are asked to consider:

What rights does it bestow? Can you identify the different types of rights within the document – civil, political, economic, social and cultural? As you read the document, consider how it compares to the earlier human rights documents you read in Module One (course.oeru.org/introduction-to-human-rights/modules-1-3/module-three-the-universal-declaration-of-human-rights/examine-the-udhr/).

Students completing the course for assessment were required to critically engage with material from at least four modules as part of the “Active Online Participation” component of their assessment. For example, students who chose to complete a task on the UDHR could either blog or post a short video that addressed the following topic: “Imagine you are on the committee drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Identify one right that you think is critical to be included in the UDHR. Make your case to the committee as to why this right is paramount” (course.oeru.org/introduction-to-human-rights/assessment/assessment/active-online-participation/).

Students undertaking assessment were also required to complete a major essay, and to undertake an online interview. The latter was somewhat equivalent to an exam, but completed verbally online via video call as a

mechanism to ensure identity and integrity in the online learning environment.

Whereas the structure of the online subject was analogous to that of an on-campus subject, the process of creating Introduction to Human Rights required a more flexible approach than usual for designing a new university subject. Typically, academics might begin this process by writing an overview, outlining the key topics and perspectives to be covered. The next step might be to divide subject content according to the number of lectures and tutorials available, before identifying appropriate lecture and reading material for each class. In this case, the strict requirement to utilize only freely accessible material meant that a topic could only be included if there was sufficient, high quality material available to be utilized, or alternatively that could be created within the budgetary constraints of the project. At the same time, it was recognized that for the subject to be of an appropriately high standard, there were several core topics that must be covered. Developing this subject, therefore, proceeded in two distinct stages. First, topics considered core to the subject were identified. These included the history and philosophy of human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights law and UN mechanisms for the protection and promotion of human rights. The next step was to conduct an audit of available material for each of these topics. It was only when this audit confirmed the availability of sufficient, high quality and freely accessible material online for each of these topics that a final decision was made to proceed with Introduction to Human Rights.

Beyond the core topics identified, decisions on course content were made in conjunction with audits exploring the availability of appropriate material online. As Selcher (2005) has noted:

Internet content is very much driven by e-commerce and popular culture, not by academics or intellectuality. It is not like a library or an encyclopedia. It is far longer on quick facts, data, sales pitches, and superficial or popular culture information than it is on in-depth scholarly analysis and interpretation. Quality control, reliability, and authoritativeness of information are major issues. (p. 175)

Broad topic areas were identified, but the final specific focus of modules was influenced by the availability of online material. This enabled the highest quality material to be incorporated into the course, while maintaining a relevant focus. It also ensured a continued focus on the cognitive, affective and action-oriented components of the transformative human rights educational model. For example, both national and thematic case studies of human rights were included as part of the course. I planned to explore two national case studies with differing outlooks on human rights, to provide students with an understanding of how international human rights conventions and mechanisms operate at the national level. An audit of available resources identified that there was excellent material available for the case studies of Australia and North Korea, and these were included as part of the course. The Australian case study fostered cognitive learning about National Human Rights Institutions, while video of witness testimony from the UN Commission of Inquiry into North Korea was included for its devastating affective impact. For some other potential national case studies, however, there was not sufficient material available. Similarly, the thematic areas that the subject explored in greater depth – indigenous rights and women’s rights – were decided at least in part due to the availability of excellent internet resources. This flexible approach enabled the highest quality material available to be utilized, while at the same time providing a diversity and balance of perspectives for students.

The subject adopted a new, expanded educational methods approach to lecture content. To date, online lectures have commonly been recordings of on-campus lectures. In many respects this can be compared to the first years of television, which featured recordings of stage plays. It took time for producers to recognize the unique opportunities provided by the new medium of television, and to obtain the financial resources to experiment. Similarly, the online learning environment has embraced only incremental change. Lectures recorded expressly for the online environment have too often featured a lone academic peering into a webcam, with poor audio and visual quality. Some MOOCS have had sufficient resources for a more professional approach. Professor Peter McPhee’s French Revolution course

on Coursera, for example, featured professionally filmed lecture segments in approximately 15-minute increments, some against a backdrop of French artwork at the National Gallery of Victoria (www.coursera.org/learn/french-revolution). Nevertheless, the dominant framework remains that of a single lecturer presenting most or all lecture content in a manner very similar to that of the on-campus experience.

Introduction to Human Rights adopted a very different approach. Rather than recording lectures for each module, I utilized the vast resources of the internet to locate freely accessible lectures presented by leading experts on each topic. To present the history of human rights, for example, I was able to source a lecture given by Professor Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, an eminent British barrister with experience at both the International Criminal Court and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).⁴ Professor Sir Nice's lecture, presented at Gresham College, provided a rich history of human rights, and was perfectly suited to the module (course.oeru.org/introduction-to-human-rights/modules-1-3/module-one-the-history-of-human-rights/watch-a-lecture-on-the-history-of-human-rights/). The OERu platform, moreover, enabled students to view the lecture without leaving the subject website. Similarly, for the topic of international human rights law I was able to incorporate an excellent lecture presented by Judge Thomas Buergenthal, a former judge in the International Court of Justice. Judge Buergenthal's lecture was recorded for the United Nations (UN) and was sourced from the UN website, lending it extra gravitas (legal.un.org/avl/ls/Buergenthal_HR_video_1.html). This approach meant that for most modules students experienced a lecture from an internationally renowned expert on the topic. To retain a sense of consistency for students, the different lectures were each introduced by myself as subject coordinator, in an introductory video that comprised the first activity for each module. In these short videos I introduced the topic

⁴ Professor Sir Nice led the prosecution of Slobodan Milošević, former President of Serbia, at the ICTY.

and identified some of the highlights of the module for the student to experience.

One of the biggest challenges associated with this expanded educational methods approach was locating appropriate lectures. There are many high quality lectures on the internet, however these are interspersed among voluminous material of much lesser quality. Identifying engaging, relevant lectures with adequate audio and visual quality was a time consuming process. Very often seemingly promising lectures would prove unsuitable for a whole range of reasons, such as a misleading title, the lecturer diverging onto a tangential topic, a partisan presentation, constant references to slides that were not included in the frame, poor quality audio, or simply a presentation that was not very engaging. Additionally, searches for lectures on particular topics were hampered by the limitations of the search functions of YouTube and Google video searches. Academics are accustomed to very clear and effective search options to locate books, journal articles and the like through keywords, title searches and very comprehensive repositories. Search options for videos are far less effective. Titles of videos posted on YouTube, for example can be misleading or quirky, and descriptions are highly variable. The effectiveness of search terms is dependent on these features, but they are not subject to any oversight. Even something as simple as whether the term “lecture” is used can influence whether a video appears in search results. There are also no central repositories for video material. This meant that creative approaches were required to find lectures on some topics. Manually exploring locations such as the UN website led to identifying some great online lectures, for example, but was a labor-intensive process. In other cases, simple searches for the names of leading experts on particular topics proved far more effective than searching for the topics themselves. Through a range of such search techniques, over time many superb lectures were able to be included in the course.

Identifying readings for Introduction to Human Rights was somewhat less of a challenge, but still required a flexible approach. The requirement that all subject material be open access meant that most textbooks could not be used. Similarly, journal articles that students might

ordinarily access through databases purchased by the library could not be used, as they were not freely accessible to all. There is an abundance of freely accessible material on the internet, but some challenges associated with finding the best material quickly emerged. First, conducting searches proved challenging. One of the major functions of databases is to provide searchability, but it comes alongside the presence of firewalls. The resources available for searching for open source material are far more limited in scope and function. Again, creative techniques were adopted to address this challenge, such as Google searches for topics and “PDF”. Repositories such as the Social Science Research Network proved helpful (www.ssrn.com/). In some cases, combining database searches with Google searches of leading results led to the identification of preprint, freely accessible versions of articles in university repositories.

A second challenge that emerged in identifying readings was finding material of an appropriate depth. In many cases topics had two kinds of material available: relatively brief and superficial analyses posted to websites such as The Conversation, or quite focused, in-depth material in journal articles. Finding open access material of intermediate depth, such as might ordinarily be found in textbooks, proved particularly challenging. To overcome this challenge, the subject utilized a less traditional source of readings: grey literature. Grey literature, such as reports published by non-governmental organizations, think tanks and research centers, proved an abundant source of freely accessible, professionally written material on human rights of a suitable depth for students. For example, the Asia Pacific Forum, a coalition of National Human Rights Institutions, provided an excellent four-page overview of “What are Human Rights?” within its manual for national human rights institutions (Asia Pacific Forum, 2012, pp. 5-8). This was utilized as the first reading for the subject, providing students with a succinct, introductory overview of key aspects of human rights. The use of grey literature aligned well with the transformative approach to the subject, with much grey literature designed to have a cognitive and affective component, and to promote action by the readership. An additional advantage of grey literature was that it was relatively easy to locate. Harvard’s Think Tank Search, a Google Custom

Search of over 590 think tanks and research centers, was an excellent resource for locating appropriate material (guides.library.harvard.edu/hks/think_tank_search). Finally, substantial use was made of primary source material throughout the subject. This included not only UN human rights declarations and treaties, but also historical human rights documents, video excerpts of testimony from victims of human rights abuses, and government documents concerning human rights.

Creating the subject website

The website for Introduction to Human Rights was built over 10-12 weeks, with content added incrementally. The OERu provided a specialized platform through which the website was built. Webpages were created through WikiEducator, before being published to a Wordpress site (wikieducator.org/Main_Page). WikiEducator provides a user-friendly platform to create educational content. Webpages are created through the adding of textual content and simple codes for various features. Free online training in wiki skills (with facilitator support) is available; it is also user-friendly enough that users can build their skills simply through practice. The open access nature of WikiEducator offers tremendous advantages to users. Practitioners are able to view the source code for any page on WikiEducator, and can simply copy and paste the code for desirable features. While building the website is primarily a self-directed process, technical help is also available as required. There are also numerous helpful features designed specifically for subject websites. For example, YouTube videos can easily be added such that students can view the videos without leaving the website. Multiple choice and true/false quizzes can be added, as can 'WEnotes', a microblogging function embedded within the site. The WikiEducator content is then published to a much more aesthetically pleasing WordPress site, which is the interface used by students.

Creating a positive student experience

As the subject was being created, a primary focus was ensuring a positive student experience. Feedback from a previous UOW subject developed on the same platform indicated that an important component of this was a clear and aesthetically pleasing website. Considerable care was taken, therefore, to ensure consistency and clarity in the appearance of and instructions for each module. The landing page for each contained a short overview of the module, followed by a button linking to the introductory video. All activities for the module were presented in a colored box, with a list of required activities presented in order. Below this were clearly marked optional activities. A maroon and grey color scheme, and the liberal use of relevant images completed the website. Within the Graduate Certificate, this approach was used consistently, resulting in minimal questions about how to proceed across the four subjects. Additionally, a decision was made to make all subject content available at once, prior to the start date, rather than to conduct a staggered release of content as the facilitated cohort proceeded. As yet, there is no clear evidence as to the best way to proceed in this respect. Indeed, even defining 'best' is problematic in the online learning space: is the goal to have the most visits to the subject website, the most completions for credit, or to provide the greatest ease of access? There is some evidence that indicates that students prefer flexibility (Mullaney & Reich, 2014). Additionally, maximizing the availability of the content most closely aligned with the commitment to open access, and to providing human rights education to the widest possible cohort. For these reasons, all subject material was released prior to commencement, enabling students to move through the subject at their preferred pace.

A number of strategies were used to promote student engagement. From this perspective, it was advantageous that the subject was created specifically for the online environment, rather than adapted from or designed in coordination with an on-campus course. This meant that evidenced-based pedagogical strategies to increase online student engagement could be fully incorporated from its inception. For example, a number of studies have identified the benefits of the online instructor

having a strong presence (Ragan 2011; Boettcher 2011; Miller 2015; Phirangee et al., 2016). This influenced decisions to create an introductory video for each module, presented by the facilitator; to have twice weekly emails sent to all participants (via Wiggio) from the facilitator, and to ensure facilitator availability to respond to queries on a daily basis.

A second pedagogical strategy utilised to promote student engagement was the promotion of an online course community. The importance of creating this online communal space is widely recognized (Boettcher, 2011; Miller, 2015). As Kukulska-Hulme has remarked, “in the era of Web 2.0, an individual’s blog post or shared video can generate debate and commentary akin to a successful classroom discussion” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2013, p. 12). There is also some evidence to suggest that participation in online discussion forums is correlated with higher student grades (Buckley, 2011). Students were encouraged and provided with opportunities to build a sense of community through Wiggio posts (an online, free educational group workspace), a Twitter hashtag specific to the subject, and through posting blogs.

The subject incorporated a number of case studies, a strategy known to enhance learning both online and on campus (Tolley, 1998). Activities were structured to promote active learning, and to empower students to be contributors of knowledge rather than simply passive recipients. Where possible, students were provided with options so they could learn according to their interests. For example, students could select four (or more) online participation activities from a total of eleven such activities, covering areas ranging from history, philosophy, law, gender studies, media and others. Many of these activities, moreover, had multiple options. So a student could select a human rights story in the news that particularly interested them, conduct some further research on it, and then explain it to their peers. Similarly, students could explore a human rights treaty of particular interest in greater depth, and provide an overview for the class. The strategy of multiple assessment tasks each worth a small component of the overall grade is also effective in incentivizing regular student engagement with subject material (Beck, 2010). Such strategies were designed to promote student engagement as much as possible throughout the subject.

Unexpected challenges

In the weeks prior to the commencement of Introduction to Human Rights, two major and unexpected challenges arose, that significantly impacted upon the running of the subject. The first was the suspension of the Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship. The Graduate Certificate, and the innovative business model through which it was offered, had been approved by UOW in 2014, with the grant money to pursue the project being made available from early 2015. By early 2016, when the Graduate Certificate was set to launch, changes in management led to an erosion of support for the project. Additionally, there were significant challenges associated with translating support at the executive level into support within the faculty. At the faculty level, concern was expressed that the business model could lead to a loss of income. It was perceived that students intending on enrolling in the Master of International Studies could delay their enrolment and first complete the Graduate Certificate. By doing so, and obtaining credit for this study, they could then complete the Master of International Studies for a lesser cost. Attempts to allay this concern, and highlight that the marketing for the Graduate Certificate was aimed at students who would otherwise not enroll at UOW, were unsuccessful. As a result, severe restrictions were placed on the way in which the subjects could be marketed, and the Graduate Certificate was suspended, just a few weeks before Introduction to Human Rights was set to commence. This was a major setback. Researchers such as Voos, Dziuban and Beck have highlighted the importance of the “active support of one’s academic institution” in the intensive process of creating blended delivery or online courses, and our experience reinforced this need (Beck, 2010, p. 285). Interestingly, however, these events were consistent with research

demonstrating the ongoing difficulty of obtaining faculty approval for online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2013).⁵

The second major and unexpected challenge experienced prior to commencement was a number of difficulties associated with advertising. The suspension of the Graduate Certificate, and the restrictions on marketing imposed by faculty, had a large impact on the way in which Introduction to Human Rights could be advertised. Additionally, the suspension of the Graduate Certificate removed a major attraction associated with the subject. It could now be offered only as a stand-alone product, leading to a certificate of completion. Furthermore, the position of the faculty was an evolving one in the period prior to commencement. This made it difficult to obtain approval for any advertising at all, and indeed delayed the advertising by some weeks. The UOW webpage advertising the subject went live much later than anticipated, substantially shortening the window of opportunity to attract students. A second issue was that the funds for advertising were very limited. Advertising costs were perhaps not adequately budgeted for in the original grant application, and a request to faculty for modest additional funding for advertising was unsuccessful. The grant itself had already been stretched to accommodate the creation of four online subjects (rather than the original three anticipated), meaning there was no flexibility to reallocate funds for advertising. Nevertheless, A\$500 was spent on advertising on Facebook in the fortnight prior to the subject commencement date. Due to an unfortunate IT error, this campaign was largely ineffective. The UOW webpage through which students could submit an expression of interest malfunctioned for much of the campaign, and by the time this error was rectified, the majority of the campaign had finished. As a result, the subject proceeded with only a small cohort of students.

⁵ Allen and Seaman note that between 2004-2012, less than a third of chief academic officers 'believe their faculty accept the value and legitimacy of online education', despite the increasing prevalence of such education.

Running the subject

Introduction to Human Rights commenced in May 2016, with 27 students. Facilitation occurred over six weeks in May and June, with students encouraged to complete two modules per week. During this period, students were emailed via Wiggio twice weekly with a short email introducing them to each module and highlighting a particular aspect of the module to provoke interest. Occasional extra emails identified additional resources available online for interested students. Students could also post Wiggio communications to the group or to me as the facilitator as they wished. As the subject progressed, students also received emails about completing it for credit. The deadline for payment for students wishing to complete the subject for credit was not until the start of week five, so students were able to complete the majority of the subject before deciding whether to do so. For students who chose to obtain credit, the two written assessment components – active online participation (comprising four blogs or video posts) and a major essay – were due in week seven. The online interview was scheduled for week nine, but with some flexibility to ensure a mutually convenient time could be negotiated.

Various measures indicated good student engagement with the subject. At the outset, students engaged in an online discussion (on Wiggio) about the question “What are human rights?”. Metrics monitoring the subject website indicated 183 page views during the week of commencement. While there was some reduction as the subject progressed (a normal occurrence in online learning), metrics indicated sustained engagement by many users. During the third week, for example, there were 154 page views. Students engaging with the course came from a wide variety of locations, including Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Nigeria, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and St Lucia. Within Australia (where the Facebook advertising was targeted) students came from NSW, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the ACT.

Strategies to promote student engagement were generally successful, with some caveats. The strong presence of the instructor was highlighted as a positive feature of the subject in student evaluations. Comments

included: 'While there are many organizations which have established MOOCs, being able to engage with an instructor and critically reflect on the material with her was key'; and 'Although nerve wracking, I believe my favourite part was the constructive feedback provided by [the instructor], congratulating me on my strengths and providing examples of where I could do better next time.' While the small cohort was initially viewed as a negative by the project team, my ability to engage with students individually as a result of this became a positive feature.

Creating and sustaining an online learning community proved challenging. The twitter hashtag for the subject led to only a small number of twitter posts. This is something I have consistently found with online and blended learning subjects (in my experiences of subjects with up to 200 students), suggesting that Twitter might not be an effective mechanism to engage students in these circumstances. Strong initial engagement with Wiggio somewhat diminished as the subject progressed. This drop-off is also common, with MOOCs typically having "massive drop-out rates" (Sanchez-Gordon & Luján-Mora, 2016, p. 155). In this subject, students could choose to post their blog posts to Wiggio, or for those completing the subject for credit, to submit them for assessment privately. The absence of a compulsion to post publicly appeared to inhibit interactivity on Wiggio. At the time, this decision was made to give students choices around their privacy, without fully recognizing its potential impact on the cohort as a whole. (However, in similar subjects I have coordinated, alternative approaches have also led to mixed results. Requiring students to publicly post their blogs has sometimes led to blogs clustering around a small number of topics, with later contributors appearing to paraphrase earlier contributors and offering little that is new. There is scope for further research on how to optimize blog contributions from students in the online environment.) Despite these challenges, student feedback on the online community was generally positive, with comments such as "interactivity was my favorite element".

At the end of the facilitated cohort, students were advised the website would remain available indefinitely. Evidence indicates that students enjoyed this flexibility, with 307 page views recorded across July.

Student feedback on the subject overall was positive. Comments I received in response to a request for feedback via email after the subject concluded included “critically engaging with the material was my favorite part of the course” and that the approach of the subject “is building bridges around the world”. Initially, it had been anticipated that the subject would run in both semesters one and two of 2016. Despite the successful creation of the subject and the completion of the first facilitated cohort, however, the faculty chose not to continue with the initiative. While the website remains available (but not maintained), the subject cannot currently be completed for credit at UOW.

Reflections on the subject

A major positive outcome of Introduction to Human Rights was the creation of a freely accessible, university-level subject on human rights. Anyone with an internet connection can access the website and undertake the subject at their own pace. Alternatively, students can select components of the subject they wish to learn more about, selectively completing modules or individual activities according to their preference. The availability of all modules at all times is an important feature facilitating human rights education. Unlike many other free learning options through providers such as Coursera and EdX, access to material is not restricted to those who enroll, or only available for short periods around a facilitated cohort. The open access composition of the subject, moreover, makes the material available to be reused in other online spaces; means teachers can reuse subject material in their classrooms; and enables the flexible repurposing of subject material generally. The creation of a tertiary level subject about human rights that is available at all times, and can be completed at no cost, is therefore a significant achievement.

From a theoretical perspective, the subject demonstrated that the online environment offers genuine opportunities for transformative human rights education. The subject was able to offer an intellectually rigorous overview of human rights, to a tertiary honors/masters level standard. The online environment also facilitated the use of affective dimensions. For

example, linking directly to video of witness testimony of human rights abuses had a powerful emotional impact. Similarly, watching lectures from leading figures on human rights, such as former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, lent a gravitas to each presentation. The use of grey literature, and of lectures from human rights practitioners like Christoph Koettl, a senior analyst at Amnesty International, provided a component focused on action-oriented strategies. Learners were able to connect classroom with community through learning about current issues in human rights internationally, and current efforts underway to address them. Through connecting human rights education with practice, students were empowered with the knowledge of how they could take action in support of human rights, should they wish to do so. While this iteration of the subject was predominantly focused on students as individuals, it also demonstrates the possibilities for tailoring online human rights education towards specific communities. There is potential for the online educational space to be utilized to strengthen community knowledge, solidarity and commitment to human rights principles. This case study provides a demonstration of the potential for transformative human rights education online.

The challenges associated with the subject provided a number of opportunities to learn from this experience, and perhaps adopt a different approach for future subjects, or future iterations of this subject. Advertising was one area in which there were a number of challenges, as discussed above. Creating an appropriate advertising plan, together with ensuring an adequate advertising budget, is an essential component of preparing an online subject, which must be considered well in advance. Some online education platforms already have established capacity in this regard. UOW's choice of a smaller online provider had considerable implications for the need to conduct advertising at the university level, and this was perhaps not adequately recognized nor budgeted for. The issues associated with advertising led to a small cohort undertaking the course. This was a positive in that the instructor was able to engage personally with students, a factor that promoted student engagement. The small cohort, however,

perhaps limited the extent to which an online learning community could be developed.

The creation of the subject highlights the many opportunities that educators in the field of human rights have to make high quality material about human rights freely available online. Taking advantage of these opportunities, moreover, is relatively simple. One important measure that academics, educators and practitioners can take is to record keynote lectures or other presentations (when permission is obtained to do so), and post the recordings online. Evidence suggests that these videos will be watched by a diverse audience, and accessed more than might be expected. Of the videos utilized in this subject for which viewing data was available, most had been viewed hundreds or even thousands of times.⁶ The lecture given by the Hon Michael Kirby on “North Korea and Human Rights” at the University of Newcastle (Australia), for example, has been viewed 233 times (Kirby, 2014).⁷ The lecture on “The International Human Rights Movement: A History”, given by Aryeh and recorded by the Open Society Foundations, attracted 2,068 views (Neier, 2012). Professor Sir Geoffrey Nice’s lecture for Gresham College on “Human Rights: Philosophy and History” has attracted a commanding 15,958 views (Nice, 2014). This suggests that posting video lectures online is a worthy undertaking for promoting education about human rights. Furthermore, a number of strategies can be utilized to ensure an engaging viewing experience and to maximize the number of views. Clear and accurate titles immeasurably aid searches for video lectures on a topic. Clear descriptions are invaluable, and it is also useful to signpost timings for different topics within a longer lecture. Long introductions might be excluded from the video, or at a minimum the description should signpost the time the speaker takes the podium. Additionally, if the speaker utilizes a PowerPoint presentation, this should be included within the video frame (or the video could switch to images of the screen at appropriate

⁶ Viewing data is only readily available for videos posted on youtube.

⁷ All figures in this paragraph are accurate as of 1 February 2018. This is one of a number of lectures given by the Hon Kirby on this topic that are available online.

moments). Finally, ensuring clear audio at a sufficient volume is essential. All these measures are relatively simple, and in most cases IT support is likely to be available to assist with video recording lectures. Providing such videos online is not only an effective way to promote human rights education, but also serves to showcase the human rights activities underway within an institution.

A second way in which human rights researchers, educators and practitioners can contribute is through publishing material in open access repositories. There are a number of ways in which this can be done at no cost. Repositories such as the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) and E-International Relations enable the free uploading and downloading of papers, and have a considerable internet presence (www.ssrn.com; <http://www.e-ir.info/>). Even many publishers of journals that do not offer free access allow authors to publish a pre-print version of their papers in locations such as the SSRN. Many universities also have open access repositories, and encourage academics to provide copies of their publications for them. Additionally, repository staff have the expertise to determine which material can be published without infringing copyright, and advise of any embargo periods. Currently, there is only a very limited range of open access textbooks available.⁸ There is a strong need for additional textbook-style material to be available in open access format, providing appropriate introductory information and analysis on topics, suitable for use at tertiary level. Academics, educators and practitioners of human rights thus have a number of ways in which they can make valuable contributions to ensuring the availability of high quality, open access material on human rights available online.

This experience highlighted the broader issues that can be associated with innovation within a university environment. While there was initially strong executive and financial support for the creation of the Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship, over time changes in university personnel

⁸ For examples see <http://www.e-ir.info/publications/>

and executive focus led to an erosion of this support. Furthermore, it proved difficult to translate executive support into support at the faculty level. It was also challenging to obtain cooperation from other units in the university needed to contribute to the project, such as the media unit. This highlights some of the complexities of working in a large, corporatized environment. The image of innovation and dynamism that universities like to project is often at odds with a heavily bureaucratic and sometimes cumbersome structure. Finding ways to innovate within such a structure, and to obtain timely support from diverse components within it, is likely to be an ongoing challenge for any project of this nature.

More broadly, I suggest that to some extent there is an inherent conflict between projects that advocate free or low-cost open access education, and the current higher education business model in Australia and elsewhere. In recent decades Australian universities have been increasingly focused on their balance sheets, at times to the detriment of the quality of education offered. They now operate within a highly corporatized and monetarized environment. While many Australian universities have been generally supportive of MOOCS, and for open education initiatives, I suggest that this is only to the extent that such initiatives refrain from challenging their current business model. In this project we did not overtly seek to do so. The low cost Graduate Certificate aimed to raise UOW's profile internationally, and potentially attract students who may not have otherwise considered UOW to undertake a (full cost) Master of International Studies following the Graduate Certificate. Nevertheless, in an environment where Graduate Certificates can command fees of A\$10,000, creating a low-cost, open access option quickly came to be seen as a threat to the university's income. Perhaps as a result of this, initial support for the initiative was unsustainable. I suggest that this inherent conflict means that similar projects offering open access and/or low cost higher education are also likely to struggle in the present academic environment. The initial hype that accompanied the advent of MOOCs, suggesting an imminent paradigm shift in university education, most likely significantly overstated their impact. Our experience and current trends in MOOC development suggest that universities will act robustly to protect

their business model. Free and low-cost online education is likely to occupy a somewhat peripheral place in higher education for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Creating Introduction to Human Rights was an innovative and exciting project. Despite some unexpected challenges, it achieved a number of important outcomes. The development of a freely accessible, tertiary-level online course in human rights was a significant achievement. It highlights the potential for transformative human rights education in an online environment. While to date there has been only one facilitated cohort of students through the subject, it has contributed to furthering human rights education, and the website remains active and accessible to all. It is hoped there might be future opportunities to facilitate cohorts through the subject, and there are current plans underway to modify the website to encourage self-paced completion of the modules. The discussion around human rights education that took place around the development of the subject also contributed to growing interest in teaching human rights on campus at UOW. A new on-campus subject, 'Human Rights and Global Politics', commenced as part of the Masters of International Studies in 2017. Introduction to Human Rights also demonstrated the feasibility and value of adopting an expanded educational methods approach to lecture content. There are now sufficient online resources available to provide students with access to lectures from internationally renowned experts on many aspects of human rights. With careful subject design and lecture selection, students can experience a world-class human rights education at no cost. This is indeed a positive development in the fields of both human rights and online education.

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